

## Toronto International Film Festival 2004—Part 2

# The problem of producing great works ... and today's best works

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*This is the second of a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto film festival.*

Great works of art cannot be drawn out of a hat. They depend, in the widest sense, on fertile subsoil prepared by complex and often protracted social and cultural processes. Extraordinary films or novels or paintings crystallize decisive human experiences, deeply felt and lived, worked up in the form of images. As the heightened expression of definite moods and feelings, this imagery adds new grains to the sum of objective truth about humanity's social and psychological makeup.

Such works cannot simply be willed into existence. In the final analysis, they come into being as the result of impulses that originate outside art. To develop genuinely enduring work, the artist must, at some level, establish contact with strong historical currents. In one fashion or other, the work must speak to the critical conflicts and dilemmas of the epoch. When those conflicts are largely concealed from the artist, when secondary and tertiary matters instead absorb him or her, problems arise. A confused and stagnant atmosphere, dominated by the self-importance of relatively privileged layers, does not assist the artist in grasping the essence of his or her time.

Nor does truly remarkable art come off the top of the head, as a purely rational exercise. Certain thoughts and feelings, reflecting critical experiences, must have thoroughly entered into the bones and marrow of the artist. Unconscious processes, intuition, slower and less susceptible to rational guidance, play a large role here. Apprehending the vast area of human relationships and emotions, memory, love, childhood feelings and more, and so thoroughly assimilating and reworking this living complex that it appears once again before the viewer or reader in the form of convincing ("lifelike") and moving characters, forms or filmed sequences, such an undertaking clearly must call upon all the conscious and unconscious capacities of the individual artist.

Great work is only sustained by great aims. In the modern era, when humanity urgently and inescapably faces the need to master its own social organization, these aims have inevitably had a super-personal character. The social revolution or the keen anticipation of such a revolution, holding out the possibility of humanity freeing itself from all forms of oppression and consciously reconstructing life on this planet, has consistently provided the strongest impulses to art.

What would art look like in the modern era largely deprived of such a vision? Look around you, in cinemas, theaters, art galleries and bookstores. We have had ample opportunity in recent decades to experience first-hand the painful consequences of the blows delivered to the confidence of artists in higher social principles and aims: a marked growth in trivialization, careerism, chilly formalism and narcissistic on-upmanship in various forms.

Works of great social insight cannot be summoned up on command, or

rather they can be, but as Hotspur asks, "will they come when you do call for them?" The appearance of such works of art is bound up with significant shifts in political and social life. Today this inevitably would mean, in the most general terms, the re-emergence of social, psychological and moral pressures that would confront the artist with the overwhelming *necessity* of unraveling the secrets of contemporary class society. Such pressures are undoubtedly accumulating. Objectively, the crisis of the capitalist order is quite advanced. Art, however, lags badly behind.

The most admirable films today look honestly and sensitively at the world. They expose the deplorable social and moral conditions under which vast numbers of people live. They reveal the corruption and decay of the existing social set-up. They encourage the viewer to take a more compassionate look at his or her fellow creatures, including the most despised and marginalized. However, they rarely, if ever, suggest (or advocate) that out of the present crisis might emerge social forces capable of radically transforming the existing state of things.

*Land of Plenty*, directed by veteran German filmmaker Wim Wenders, is a case in point. To its credit, the film is perhaps the most serious look yet taken at post-September 11 America. No US filmmaker has even come close to this.

Paul (John Diehl) is a Vietnam veteran and long-suffering victim of the American military's chemical warfare ("Agent Pink"). After years of struggling for normalcy, the events of September 11 have unhinged him again. He rides around Los Angeles in a van jammed full of surveillance equipment, listening to right-wing talk radio and looking for Al Qaeda "sleeper cells" and such.

His niece, Lana (Michelle Williams), the daughter of missionaries, returns to the US after years in Africa and the Middle East. A pacifist, a Christian, she goes directly to live and work in a homeless shelter in downtown Los Angeles. On the drive from the airport, the shelter's director points out to Lana that there are "more homeless and hungry in L.A. than anywhere in the US." He continues, "the last thing they're talking about in the West Wing [of the White House] is poverty in America."

Lana's efforts to make contact with her uncle are largely rebuffed. He has long since cut his ties with family. Nonetheless, the drive-by shooting of a 'suspicious Arab' outside Lana's mission brings the two of them together. The dying man's last words take the pair to the rundown industrial town of Trona in the Mojave Desert. There Paul's paranoid fantasies ("They're trying to destroy our country; they're trying to infect us") disintegrate in the face of simple but stark realities.

In one moving scene Paul and Lana recount their experience of September 11. She tells him she was overseas, "I heard people cheering." "Terrorists," he shoots back. No, she explains regretfully, they were "ordinary people. Because they hate us, they hate America. ... I knew

something had gone wrong.” Later she explains, “I don’t think they [the victims of the terrorist attack] would want more people killed in their name.”

With its emphasis on the “confusion and pain and paranoia”—in Wenders’ words—felt by so many Americans in the wake of the terrorist attacks, the film is a moving and troubling work. Paul is the more complex character, and Wenders has rendered him critically, but with sympathy. The director comments, “You cannot despise such a broken and abused character for what he has become, or for what ‘the system,’ so to speak, has made of him.”

Wenders’ film is remarkable for another reason. Shot on digital video in a mere 16 days, *Land of Plenty* places social deprivation in America at its very center. The filmmaker explains: “The common theme for both places [Los Angeles and Trona] was poverty, an unknown category when you think of America, the richest nation in the world. Poverty is the real subtext of the film, even if we didn’t make it the explicit subject of our interest.” The locations of the film “really complement each other and together form a sort of ‘other America,’ a less-known one, for sure, but representing a poignant reality of deprivation, socially as well as culturally, that stands in stark contrast to the image of the military superpower with its exhilarating expenses made abroad, resources that are badly missing at home.”

Wenders’ own liberal, Christian outlook blinds him to many critical connections, precisely, for example, between the outburst of American belligerence and the growth of social antagonisms at home, with all their revolutionary implications. It is telling that the director has created as Paul’s ideological opposite, not a conscious opponent of the social order, but a sweet and naive follower of Christ. One should not be surprised by this, and insofar as all sorts of confused notions prevail among young people concerned with social justice, the film might not be entirely off the mark. Nonetheless, the depths of social misery *Land of Plenty* exposes cannot be addressed, much less cured, on the basis of the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

*The World* is the fourth feature directed by Chinese filmmaker Jia Zhangke [see accompanying interview], following *Xiao Wu* (or *Pickpocket*), *Platform* and *Unknown Pleasures*. Each has taken a sharp-eyed look at the ‘new China,’ in particular, at the harsh impact of the introduction of free market policies on young people and workers in or from the provinces.

Jia’s newest film takes place almost entirely inside a 114-acre theme park, World Park, on the outskirts of Beijing. The park contains kitsch replicas of internationally renowned buildings and sites, including the Eiffel Tower, the Taj Mahal, the Leaning Tower of Pisa, London Bridge, etc.

The film follows the lives of park employees, focusing on the relationship between Tao (Zhao Tao), a lead dancer in the park’s musical spectacular, and Taisheng (Cheng Tai-sheng), a security guard, who makes shady money on the side. Other couples and individuals also come into view: a young dancer who sleeps with the boss to advance her career; Tao’s quarrelsome, sulky brother; “Little Sister,” a freshfaced kid from the provinces working in the construction trade; a ferociously jealous young man and his coquettish girl-friend; the local lowlifes for whom Taisheng provides fake ID cards; the woman, who earns a living making copies of foreign fashions, with whom he conducts a brief affair.

“See the world without ever leaving Beijing,” proclaims the park’s propaganda. And “Paris in a Beijing suburb.” Of course it’s an imitation world. None of the characters has ever really been anywhere. Not only has Tao never been on an airplane personally, she explains somewhat resentfully, “I don’t *know* anyone who’s ever been on a plane.” The façade of cosmopolitanism and Chinese ‘modernization’ is entirely false.

The employees live in crowded dormitories or hang out in dismal hotel rooms. A group of Russian performers also works at the park. The women’s passports are taken away by their ‘manager.’ One fears the

worst, and is rewarded. Later, at a company-sponsored party where Tao is propositioned by a thuggish businessman, she meets one of the Russian women, now a prostitute. The painful historical irony of the encounter between the Russian and Chinese low-paid workers, toiling away in the ‘World Park,’ obliged to speak English at one point in order to communicate, should not be lost on any spectator.

In one of the most moving sequences, “Little Sister” is fatally injured, working at night, on a construction site. In his hospital room, he writes a final note, a list of debts, “3 yuan to the noodle stand” on such and such a corner, 7 yuan to so-and-so. Heart-breaking, and intended to be.

The unconscious and desperate relations between Tao and Taisheng veer inevitably toward a tragic denouement. At one point she warns him not to cheat on her, “You’re my whole life.” He replies dryly, “You can’t count on anyone these days. Don’t think so much of me.” And his conduct backs up his words. All the young people have great trouble expressing their emotions to one another; they prefer cell-phones and text messages. The picture of a terribly repressed and repressive society, with vast problems and contradictions, begins to emerge.

The film is elegantly and carefully made, with great sensitivity to its characters’ social conditions and inner lives. Jia is one of the most talented of the young Chinese directors. However, large questions about the nature of Chinese society within globalized capitalism remain unanswered. And one feels their unresolved character at the level of the drama.

One cannot help sensing that the difficulty in arriving at general conclusions about Chinese history and society has a bearing on the narrative approach of many of the Chinese and Taiwanese filmmakers. No doubt specific cultural traditions come into play, but the elliptical style, the deliberate fracturing of so many works into many small and apparently discrete dramatic units—cinematic *non sequiturs*, so to speak—may reflect in part this absence of an overall perspective. The filmmakers see individual fragments and moments of life in the region with astonishing clarity and even brilliance, but developing a comprehensive picture is more challenging.

Hence the somewhat contrived ending to *The World*. Unable to connect the various elements together in an entirely organic manner, Jia is obliged to force the issue, bringing the story to a close by quasi-artificial means. One does not feel as moved as one should. By this time the series of incidents has threatened to become tedious.

Nonetheless, *The World* shows more of the world than nearly any recent North American film one can think of. Jia’s work needs and deserves to be followed with genuine interest.

*Gunner Palace* is a remarkable documentary about the US occupation of Iraq. Co-director Michael Tucker traveled to Iraq four times between June 2003 and February 2004, filming members of the US army’s 2/3 Field Artillery unit, the Gunner Battalion, based in one of the late Uday Hussein’s palaces in Baghdad.

While they never explicitly spell out their anti-war views, the filmmakers (German-born Petra Epperlein is co-director) effectively juxtapose the comments and claims of George W. Bush, Donald Rumsfeld and Armed Forces Radio to the realities of life and war in Adhamiya, a largely Sunni section of northern Baghdad. The film begins by noting that Bush declared “major combat” over in May 2003; a soldier sardonically notes, “This is minor combat.”

We witness a variety of scenes: soldiers cavorting in Uday Hussein’s former swimming pool; patrolling the streets of Adhamiya (“They don’t like Americans back here”); kicking in the doors of suspected “insurgents” and “bad guys,” i.e., those opposing the colonial occupation of their country; and desperately striving for normalcy in an obviously deteriorating military situation.

The documentary makes the case that the soldiers sent to Iraq come from a “forgotten America,” many of them fresh out of high school in

small towns without economic prospects. They come across neither as monsters nor heroes, but as basically decent young people caught up in world events for which they are in no way prepared.

Nonetheless, they are obliged to carry out criminal activities, and some of them become criminals as a result. The film captures the fear and outrage of those Iraqis unfortunate enough to fall into the hands of US forces. One of three brothers made to kneel, while handcuffed, and screamed at repeatedly to “Shut up!” by members of the Gunner unit, responds bitterly, “I know this ‘shut up.’” The prisoners, ominously, are being transferred to Abu Ghraib prison. The speed and effectiveness with which the US military, by its brutality and general swinishness, has antagonized the entire Iraqi population is hinted at.

The soldiers horse around, play music, rap, complain about their lack of equipment, play video games, and access porno sites on their laptops. They’re alternately bored and under siege. The first signs of a widespread insurgency emerge. “I can see it turning bad very soon,” one black soldier says in February 2004. Another describes how demonstrators threw rocks, sticks and chairs, “Anything they could pick up,” at the US forces. Disaster clearly looms.

PFC Michael Commisso tells the camera, with a combination of pride and horror, “How many people can say they’re combat veterans? I’m nineteen years old and I fought in a war.” He’s already seen more than any 19-year-old should have to have seen. One of his fellow soldiers recounts how he killed his first. “It tore me up.” But he “learned to live with it.”

Patriotism and belief in the Bush administration’s “war on terror” are in short supply, demoralization and disaffection far more widespread. A soldier bluntly explains, “I don’t feel that I’m defending my country any more.” How many continue to believe in Saddam Hussein’s phantom “weapons of mass destruction” and his regime’s “links to Al Qaeda”? Not too many, one suspects.

The last two comments in the film are revealing. One member of the Gunners tells Tucker’s camera that he doesn’t believe violence ever led to anything in history; the last remarks that there is “no way to rationalize the death of someone’s family member.”

And this is the army with which the US imperialists plan to conquer the world. They have certain difficulties on their hands.



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